

Security Quickie 3-19-02, Identity Theft



Everybody wants to be... YOU!!! Thousands of people really do want to be you, at least from the perspective of identity theft. These people are identity thieves, and they will use your identity to steal your financial reputation, your credit, and your money. Not likely, you think? Sadly, it is becoming more likely every day. Identity theft is a quickly growing criminal industry. Statistics from the Federal Trade Commission note that identity theft was the #1 Consumer Fraud complaint in 2001; 42% of all complaints received (over 85,000 reported cases) were related to this growing threat. A recent article in the Des Moines Register (Jan. 30, 2001) illustrates quite clearly that we in the Midwest are not immune to this heinous activity.

Indeed, the Des Moines Police Department reported 127 cases of Identity theft last year in Des Moines alone.

From a recent Associated Press article:

Identity theft breakdown:

- In 9 out of 10 cases, the victim does not know the suspect
- 42% accessed credit card accounts
- 13% accessed bank accounts
- 7% obtained loans for vehicles or real estate
- 20% conducted telephone or utility fraud
- 9% conducted employment related fraud
- 6% obtained a driver's license, Social Security card, fraudulent tax returns or government benefits.

If an identity thief can obtain your Social Security Number, he or she can often use that to gain more information about you. Thieves can often convince people or manipulate people into giving them more information (known as Social Engineering) and eventually have enough information to steal a target's identity. Another way identity thieves gain information is by stealing identification numbers through the Internet. Credit card numbers are high-priority targets because they can be quickly used to transfer money, purchase items and get refunds, and are even their own source of currency in the online criminal world.

Protect your identity! Do not share confidential personal and financial information with any unknown sources or from unsolicited e-mail. If a government agency or a business requests such information via unencrypted e-mail, contact them directly by phone or by e-mail to confirm the request. Any such request may be an attempted e-mail scam, and thus is probably not legitimate correspondence.

Do you get credit card offers or other financial offers via postal mail? Of course you do! If you do not wish to accept such offers, do not just throw the mail away, rip it up or

shred it before disposal. The chance of a thief successfully using your trash or postal mail to commit fraud is greatly reduced. There are many sources of information you can go to in order to learn more about identity theft issues. The following is the U.S. government central website for information about identity theft:

<http://www.consumer.gov/idtheft/>. It has information on how to minimize your risk, what to do if you are a victim, and many other useful tips. The Iowa Attorney General's website also has a brochures on the topic of Identity Theft. They include a Scam Alert, a guide on avoiding identity theft, and a guide for victims of identity theft.

http://www.state.ia.us/government/ag/consumer/consumer_info.html

Remember, education and proactive behavior is your best defense against identity theft.